



## **DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

### **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

#### **50 CFR Part 635**

**[Docket No. 180117042-8884-02]**

**RTID 0648-XA652**

#### **Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fisheries**

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Temporary rule; quota transfer.

**SUMMARY:** NMFS is transferring 19.5 metric tons (mt) of Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) quota from the Reserve category to the General category. This action is intended to provide additional opportunities for General category fishermen to participate in the December General category fishery, which is scheduled to reopen on December 1, 2020, and is based on consideration of the regulatory determination criteria regarding inseason adjustments. This action would affect Atlantic tunas General category (commercial) permitted vessels and Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Charter/Headboat category permitted vessels with a commercial sale endorsement when fishing commercially for BFT.

**DATES:** Effective December 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Sarah McLaughlin or Nicholas Velseboer, 978-281-9260, or Larry Redd, 301-427-8503.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** Regulations implemented under the authority of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act (ATCA; 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.*) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*) governing the harvest of BFT by persons and vessels subject to U.S.

jurisdiction are found at 50 CFR part 635. Section 635.27 subdivides the U.S. BFT quota recommended by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and as implemented by the United States among the various domestic fishing categories, per the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (2006 Consolidated HMS FMP) (71 FR 58058, October 2, 2006) and amendments. NMFS is required under ATCA and the Magnuson-Stevens Act to provide U.S. fishing vessels with a reasonable opportunity to harvest the ICCAT-recommended quota.

The current baseline General and Reserve category quotas are 555.7 mt and 29.5 mt, respectively. See § 635.27(a). Each of the General category time periods (January, June through August, September, October through November, and December) is allocated a “subquota” or portion of the annual General category quota. The baseline subquotas for each time period are as follows: 29.5 mt for January; 277.9 mt for June through August; 147.3 mt for September; 72.2 mt for October through November; and 28.9 mt for December. Any unused General category quota rolls forward from one time period to the next and is available for use in subsequent time periods. To date for 2020, NMFS has taken several actions that resulted in adjustments to the General and Reserve category quotas, leaving 20 mt of quota currently available in the Reserve category (85 FR 17, January 2, 2020; 85 FR 6828, February 6, 2020; 85 FR 43148, July 16, 2020; 85 FR 59445, September 22, 2020; 85 FR 61872, October 1, 2020; 85 FR 64411, October 13, 2020; and 85 FR 68798, October 30, 2020).

For the January 2020 subquota period, NMFS transferred 19.5 mt of BFT quota from the December 2020 subquota period, and transferred 51 mt from the Reserve category, resulting in an adjusted subquota of 100 mt for the January 2020 period and a subquota of 9.4 mt for the December 2020 period (85 FR 17, January 2, 2020, and 85 FR

6828, February 6, 2020). The General category fishery is currently closed and reopens December 1, 2020.

### **Transfer of 19.5 mt from the Reserve Category to the General Category**

Under § 635.27(a)(9), NMFS has the authority to transfer quota among fishing categories or subcategories, after considering regulatory determination criteria provided under § 635.27(a)(8). NMFS has considered all of the relevant determination criteria and their applicability to this inseason quota transfer. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:

Regarding the usefulness of information obtained from catches in the particular category for biological sampling and monitoring of the status of the stock (§ 635.27(a)(8)(i)), biological samples collected from BFT landed by General category fishermen and provided by BFT dealers continue to provide valuable data for ongoing scientific studies of BFT age and growth, migration, and reproductive status. Additional opportunity to land BFT in the General category would support the collection of a broad range of data for these studies and for stock monitoring purposes.

NMFS also considered the catches of the General category quota to date (including during the summer/fall and winter fisheries in the last several years), and the likelihood of closure of that segment of the fishery if no adjustment is made (§ 635.27(a)(8)(ii) and (ix)). Preliminary landings data as of November 16, 2020, indicate that the General category has landed approximately 818 mt this year, which is also the total of the adjusted subquotas for the January through November time period. Absent a transfer, the December General category fishery would reopen on December 1 with an available quota of 9.4 mt, which, depending on BFT availability and fishing conditions, could be harvested quickly. Transferring 19.5 mt of BFT quota from the Reserve category would result in 28.9 mt being available to the General category in December, restoring the December subquota to its base amount prior to the January 2, 2020 action

(85 FR 17), and would leave 0.5 mt in the Reserve category to account for any BFT mortalities associated with research.

Regarding the projected ability of the vessels fishing under the particular category quota (here, the General category) to harvest the additional amount of BFT quota transferred before the end of the fishing year (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iii)), NMFS considered General category landings over the last several years and landings to date this year. Landings are highly variable and depend on access to commercial-sized BFT and fishing conditions, among other factors. NMFS anticipates that General category participants will be able to harvest the 19.5 mt of transferred BFT quota by the end of the fishing year.

NMFS also considered the estimated amounts by which quotas for other gear categories of the fishery might be exceeded (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iv)) and the ability to account for all 2020 landings and dead discards. In the last several years, total U.S. BFT landings have been below the available U.S. quota such that the United States has carried forward the maximum amount of underharvest allowed by ICCAT from one year to the next. NMFS will need to account for 2020 landings and dead discards within the adjusted U.S. quota, consistent with ICCAT recommendations, and anticipates having sufficient quota to do that, even with this 19.5 mt transfer to the General category. Thus, this quota transfer would allow fishermen to take advantage of the availability of fish on the fishing grounds to the extent consistent with the available amount of transferrable quota and other management objectives, while avoiding quota exceedance.

NMFS also considered the effects of the adjustment on the BFT stock and the effects of the transfer on accomplishing the objectives of the FMP (§ 635.27(a)(8)(v) and (vi)). This transfer would be consistent with the current quotas, which were established and analyzed in the 2018 BFT quota final rule (83 FR 51391, October 11, 2018), and with objectives of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments and is not expected to negatively impact stock health or to affect the stock in ways not already

analyzed in those documents. Another principal consideration is the objective of providing opportunities to harvest the full annual U.S. BFT quota without exceeding it based on the goals of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments, including to achieve optimum yield on a continuing basis and to optimize the ability of all permit categories to harvest their full BFT quota allocations (related to § 635.27(a)(8)(x)). Specific to the General category, this includes providing opportunity equitably across all time periods.

Based on the considerations above, NMFS is transferring 19.5 mt from the Reserve category to the General category. Therefore, NMFS adjusts the General category December 2020 subquota quota to 28.9 mt and adjusts the Reserve category quota to 0.5 mt. The General category fishery reopens December 1, 2020, and will remain open until December 31, 2020, or until the adjusted General category quota is reached, whichever comes first.

### **Monitoring and Reporting**

NMFS will continue to monitor the BFT fishery closely. Dealers are required to submit landing reports within 24 hours of a dealer receiving BFT. Late reporting by dealers compromises NMFS' ability to timely implement actions such as quota and retention limit adjustment, as well as closures, and may result in enforcement actions. Additionally, and separate from the dealer reporting requirement, General and HMS Charter/Headboat category vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead within 24 hours of the landing(s) or end of each trip, by accessing *hmspermits.noaa.gov* or by using the HMS Catch Reporting app, or calling (888) 872-8862 (Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.).

Depending on the level of fishing effort and catch rates of BFT, NMFS may determine that additional action (*e.g.*, closure) is necessary to ensure available subquotas are not exceeded or to enhance scientific data collection from, and fishing opportunities

in, all geographic areas. If needed, subsequent adjustments will be published in the **Federal Register**. In addition, fishermen may call the Atlantic Tunas Information Line at (978) 281-9260, or access *hmspermits.noaa.gov*, for updates on quota monitoring and inseason adjustments.

NMFS reminds General category participants that when the fishery reopens December 1, 2020, the BFT General category daily retention limit will be one large medium or giant BFT per vessel per day/trip.

### **Classification**

NMFS issues this action pursuant to section 305(d) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. This action is required by 50 CFR part 635, which was issued pursuant to section 304(c), and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS (AA) finds that it is impracticable and contrary to the public interest to provide prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, this action for the following reasons:

The regulations implementing the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments provide for inseason quota transfers to respond to the unpredictable nature of BFT availability on the fishing grounds, the migratory nature of this species, and the regional variations in the BFT fishery. Affording prior notice and opportunity for public comment to implement the quota transfer for the December 2020 subquota period at this time is impracticable and contrary to the public interest as NMFS could not have proposed this action earlier, as it needed to consider and respond to updated landings data in deciding to transfer a portion of the Reserve quota to the General category quota. If NMFS was to offer a public comment period now, after having appropriately considered that data, it could preclude fishermen from harvesting BFT that are legally available consistent with all of the regulatory criteria. This action does not raise conservation and management concerns. Transferring quota from the Reserve category to the General category does not

affect the overall U.S. BFT quota, and available data shows the adjustment would have a minimal risk of exceeding the ICCAT-allocated quota. NMFS notes that the public had an opportunity to comment on the underlying rulemakings that established the U.S. BFT quota and the inseason adjustment criteria. For all of the above reasons, there is good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) to waive the 30-day delay in effectiveness.

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.* and 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: November 23, 2020.

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